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ABSTRACT

Grade inflation is a serious problem in multisectioned speech communication courses, and one of its principal causes is a desire for positive student evaluations and high enrollments on the part of professors and economically insecure departments (who need the funding generated by high enrollments). Positive student evaluations have been found to correlate with high grades, and students have been shown to expect that they can influence their final grades by rating their instructors highly. Research indicates that most departments realize this, and are also aware that professors often aim for positive evaluations in order to get tenure, yet they often fail to intervene to curb grade inflation. Fair grading, however, is a teacher's moral and ethical responsibility, and administrations must take steps to ensure that faculty members do not contribute to grade inflation. Administrators evaluating instructors of multisectioned courses should: (1) have the instructor prepare a statement of grading criteria; (2) send the grading patterns of all other multi-sectioned courses to each instructor; (3) compare an instructor's grading pattern with student evaluations during decisions on tenure, salary, and promotion; and (4) separate at least some of the grading from instruction, for example, by having separate lecturers and graders for large courses. These steps should lead to ethical grading procedures, and benefit both students and teachers in the end. (SKC)

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# Ethics, Grades, and Grade Inflation: Student Evaluations as a Factor in Multi-Sectioned Courses

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Some educators do not consider grade inflation to be destructive; some even laud it in the name of democratization and humanization of higher education. While acknowledging those positions, this paper is not intended to debate those views, since they have been discussed at length by other writers.[1] Among the latter is the historian Henry Cohen who writes: "The grade inflation of recent years . . . is even more serious than has been commonly realized, for it has happened not in courses that are stable in range and depth, but in courses sadly diminished in content."[2] This paper addresses those who agree with Cohen about the serious consequences which follow from inflation of grades and deflation of standards. More particularly, it addresses those who are involved with multi-sectioned courses in speech communication--in which the inflation of grades by some instructors raises ethical as well as academic issues.

The causes of grade inflation have been debated as frequently as the consequences. Since many of the analyses are subjective assessments of the motivations of graders, some of the conclusions are uncertain. However, some analyses are more objective and point to prevalent grade inflation among colleges and universities which accept less qualified students and subsequently reduce standards in order to keep enrollments at economically acceptable levels.[3] Similarly, some departments--often in the same economically insecure institutions--show higher patterns of grade inflation as they seek to compete with programs whose career orientation or social popularity are attracting larger numbers of students.[4] This cause of grade inflation--which can be called economic insecurity--is not only institutional and departmental. It also exists among teachers whose economic security rests on attracting a sufficient number of students into their divisions of multi-sectioned courses and in eliciting sufficiently high student evaluations to preserve their jobs.

Worst case scenarios have been noted in this commentary published by The Chronicle of Higher Education:

> Virtually every campus has its tales of faculty members' efforts to influence the ratings. There was the assistant professor who "confessed" to his class, very near evaluation time, that his wife needed long-term medical treatment, which would not be possible unless he were granted tenure. There was the full professor who wanted to keep up her image as an "outstanding" teacher, so she trimmed lecture material to a minimum and made the classroom a sort of theater for entertainment.[5]

Such examples cannot be dismissed as isolated instances. While the quest for high student evaluations is usually more subtle than described in the above cases, a correlation between grade inflation and student evaluations has been established in numerous studies. Louis Goldman offers the following summary of several related studies. Documentation of each research finding is provided in his article.

> Student evaluations are among the most frequently cited factors in the literature concerning grade inflation. One recent study went so far as to claim that ". . . student ratings of faculty diminish the quality of higher education; they poison faculty/student relationships by encouraging professors to use students rather than educate them. They inhibit academic free expression, encourage faculty to target instruction at the lowest common denominator, and cause faculty to withhold or distort their professional judgment." Other studies use equally strong language:

> "student evaluation . . . is felt to increase faculty vulnerability to student expectations for high grades," and "faculty intimidation results from student ratings . . . ." Although French-Lazovik believes "that favorable student evaluations cannot be bought by giving easy grades," Aleamoni's survey shows that research does not generally support French-Lazovik's viewpoint. Kennedy concluded that ". . . grades were significantly correlated with [student's] ratings of faculty performance," and Snyder's and Clair's interesting experimental research supports the thesis "that a teacher can get a 'good' rating simply by assigning good grades." . . . In general, faculty members seem to believe that more lenient grading practices will contribute to more positive evaluations by students, while 70% of students in a recent study "indicated that the grade they thought they would get influenced the level at which they rated their professor." Quid pro quo.[6]

Goldman does not hesitate to describe a professor's modification of grades in anticipation of student evaluations as unethical, "breaking a social contract inherent in our profession."[7] But equally accountable are administrators who recognize the connection between grade inflation and student evaluations, yet continue to make personnel decisions which encourage this pattern. A study by L. David Weller indicates that 61% of the deans of colleges of education at private institutions and 73% of their counterparts at public institutions believe the use of student evaluations as a consideration for granting tenure and promotion contributes to grade inflation.[8] To know this and yet fail to intervene is a breach of ethics by administrators. The victims of such unethical

conduct are those teachers who risk their careers by maintaining high standards, and the students whose education is diminished by teachers whose first priority is self-preservation.

Any solution to this problem must begin with the premise that grading is an element of job performance and should not be protected under the aegis of academic freedom. While the presumption should be that a teacher is making careful and ethical grading judgments, an administrator should not overlook evidence to the contrary. To argue that administrators should not intervene in the face of questionable grading patterns parallels the argument that professors need not intervene to prevent student cheating. The dubious argument in both cases seems to be that the perpetrator will eventually reap the consequences of his/her actions in diminished self-respect and reputation. Such a laissez faire approach does nothing to protect the immediate victims: fellow students of a cheater and colleagues of a self-serving grader. Just as a teacher has an ethical responsibility to protect honest students, so an administrator has a responsibility to protect honorable faculty members.

The following suggestions are courses of action which could be taken by administrators when evaluating instructors of multi-sectioned courses.

1. Each instructor could reasonably be expected to prepare a detailed statement of grading criteria to be given to each student and the department head at the beginning of each course. This seems particularly important in performance classes where grading subjectivity can only be tempered by pre-announced criteria. There is no suggestion that instructors' criteria must be identical, but the requirement of these written guidelines would underscore the seriousness placed by the institution on precise grading and would give an administrator one means of analyzing and comparing grading patterns from different sections of the same course.

2. The grading patterns of every section of multi-sectioned courses could be sent to every instructor of the course at the end of each term. Such reports could easily be produced by computers and could protect the privacy of students by presenting group distributions with no student identification. This action would again underscore the administration's seriousness about monitoring grading patterns. Moreover, the comparative information now available to all instructors could be expected to result in some self-correction. The need for self-esteem and peer-respect may often prove stronger than the desire for job security. At least, such self-adjustments should be given the chance to operate, through a means that is consistent with the best aspirations of higher education: true and open information.

3. When analyzing student evaluations as part of a reappointment, tenure, promotion, or salary decision, a department head could compare the student evaluations with the instructor's grading pattern. One means of analysis could parallel Robert Oliphant's concept of "student performance standing."[9] Oliphant recognizes that uneven grade inflation discriminates against students in those sections or courses in which grading standards are higher; moreover the transcripts which result from these uneven grading patterns are misleading to prospective employers and graduate schools. Oliphant suggests that transcripts should record not only course grades, but the context of those grades--expressed in "relative performance terms." He offers the following illustration.

> If student O, for example, has a cumulative grade point average of 3.0, and the overall class average for the courses which he has taken turns out to be 2.9, his "relative performance" standing would turn out to be a mere .1--not very impressive, we would have to admit. In

> the case of student P, with a cumulative grade point average of 2.8, should the overall class average for his courses turn out to be 2.3, his "relative performance" standing would turn out to be .5--quite a cut above the superficially more outstanding record of student O. With this sort of "relative performance" evidence at our disposal, I suspect we might consider student P a relatively promising candidate for a credential program or for a graduate program. More important, we would have solid evidence upon which to make a decision.[10]

The inclusion of relative performance data in a transcript does not omit or modify the grades awarded to students; it does, however, add information which may help an evaluator make fairer comparative decisions regarding employment, admission to graduate study, fellowship awards, or distribution of financial aid. If relative performance data would contribute to a fairer evaluation of a student's record, could a similar kind of analysis be used by administrators in weighing student evaluations of professors? The parallel is not exact because a teacher's relative performance compared to other teachers is the problematic system already in operation on many campuses. However, a modification of the concept could be used in which a professor's mean evaluation by the students in each of his/her classes is followed by the mean grade awarded by the professor in each class. Thus, professor A--teaching section one of Introduction to Speech--might receive a mean student evaluation of 3.01 in the context of awarding a mean grade of 3.00, resulting in a relative performance standing of +.01. Professor B--teaching section two of the same course--might receive a mean student evaluation of 2.86 in the context of awarding a mean grade of 2.30,

resulting in a relative performance standing of +.56. Such relative performance standings obviously should not be used in isolation, but they would provide an additional kind of comparative data to the evaluating administrator and would combat the temptation of insecure professors to inflate grades as a way of securing high student evaluations relative to other professors. Moreover, a teacher whose mean student evaluations are well below or well above the means of his/her grade distributions is accumulating an important professional record which reflects the degree of student respect instead of responses to grades. (Those institutions using student evaluation systems which do not parallel a 4.00 grading system would need to modify the compilation of data, but a form of relative performance analysis could still be implemented.)

4. Finally, the ethical strains of grading in the face of student evaluations might be lessened by separating instruction from a portion of grading. Speech performance courses could incorporate an element of the European model of education in which the teacher is not the same person as the tester/grader. Multi-sectioned speech communication courses could be structured in a way that allowed the final major performance assignment to be evaluated by a different instructor or instructors, with professors rotating among sections. One effect of this arrangement would be the creation of a team effort in which teacher and students would be working together to meet an outside evaluation. Under such arrangements, student evaluations would more likely address the quality of that team effort, and the possibility of <u>quid pro quo</u> exchanges of student evaluations and teacher's grades would be lessened. Beyond addressing this particular problem, such an arrangement would provide students with wider and more realistic performance experiences, would necessarily increase communication among instructors, and would naturally encourage a greater commonality of grading standards.

Ultimately, every professor is ethically accountable for his/her professional decisions--even in a time when student evaluations coupled with job

insecurity can make ethical behavior painful. But it follows that administrators who expect ethical conduct should strive to create just systems of evaluation which encourage educators to compete only with their own best selves. The beneficiaries of this dual commitment will be students who are stretched to their highest achievements.

NOTES

1 Henry Cohen, "Inflated Grades, Deflated Courses: Has Insecurity Induced Compromise?," Change, 16, No. 4, (May/June 1984), 8-10; Robert C. Dick, "Effects of Grade Inflation on Speech Communication Majors," SCA Convention, Chicago, 14 Nov. 1986; Jim W. Corder, "Stalking the Wild Grade Inflator," Liberal Education, 69, No. 2, (Summer 1983), 173-77; Louis Goldman, "The Betrayal of the Gatekeepers: Grade Inflation," The Journal of General Education, 37, No. 2 (1985), 97-121.

2 Cohen, p. 9.

3 Vaughan A. Dickson, "An Economic Model of Faculty Grading Practices," Journal of Economic Education, 15, No. 3, (Summer 1984), p. 197.

4 Cohen, pp. 8-10.

5 Ronald S. Sibley, "Ratings of Teachers by Their Students Should be Used Wisely--or Not At All," The Chronicle of Higher Education, 28 Nov. 1985, p. 88.

6 Goldman, pp. 105-06.

7 Goldman, p. 110.

8 L. David Weller, "Attitude Toward Grade Inflation: A Survey of Private and Public Colleges of Education," Journal of Research and Development in Education, 18, No. 1, (1984), p. 54.

9 Robert Oliphant, "Stalking the Soft Option: Some Notes on Overinflated Grading Standards," Liberal Education, 66, (Winter 1980), pp. 431-39.

10 Oliphant, p. 436.